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ABSTRACT

This discussion reviews literature on early bilingualism and early reading in two languages and summarizes a research project aimed at developing the experimental conditions for teaching early bilingual reading in institutional settings. The review notes positive effects of early reading generally and of early bilingual literacy on intellectual growth and general education. However, the anecdotal information available needs support from well-grounded experimental research. An Italian research design was developed to examine the possibilities and effectiveness of learning to read in two languages, starting at age 4. The research project would also examine the correlations between early literacy and bilingual development, early literacy and cognitive development, and early bilingual literacy and the overcoming of cognitive and linguistic disadvantages of lower- income or immigrant children. A special reading kit suggesting appropriate classroom teachirg techniques and a parent guidebook were developed, as well as a variety of pre- and posttests and a parent questionnaire. The research project is in use with some groups of bilingual and immigrant children in French-Italian, German-Italian, and Basque-speaking areas of Europe; further applications in other language groups are recommended. (MSE)

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Early Bilingual Reading

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Early bilingual reading

Renzo Titone

The problem of the feasibility and advisability of teaching reading in two languages simultaneously at preschool age has recently become an important and fascinating issue for psychologists and educators. Studying the factors underlying the process of early bilingual reading has attracted the interest of students of child bilingualism and bilingual education, developmental psychologists and psycholinguists, educators of bilingual children and of migrant workers' children. There is a growing conviction regarding the possible positive effects of early reading and early bilingual literacy upon intellectual growth and general education.

It is becoming more and more a common belief that the benefits found to be present in a score of cases recorded by a few attentive authors can be generalized to larger populations of bilingual children at pre-school and elementary-school age. However, anecdotal experience needs boosting by well-grounded experimental research. This discussion proposes to examine previous experience and ongoing research in order to define new prospects and perspectives.

Early bilingual reading and the child's psychological development

Bilingual reading is related on the one hand to intellectual growth and on the other to basic education. It is therefore necessary to define some basic concepts connected with the three areas of primary concern, namely the mutual relationship between language and intelligence from a developmental point of view, the interdependence of bilingualism and reading, and the relationship between bilingual reading and basic education.

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EARLY BILINGUALISM AND INTELLIGENCE

Bilingualism is not a monolithic state of mind and behaviour but a kind of linguistic competence varying in degree. Usually one language is dominant, at least in one area or level of communication. True bilingualism, or fully fluent, balanced bilingualism, implies a functionally sufficient command of two language systems with regard to phonological, grammatical, lexical and pragmatic abilities. Only with respect to balanced bilinguals is it possible to consider the effects of bilingualism on cognitive growth.

Contrary to earlier indications more recent findings confirm that bilingual children appear to have a mental flexibility, a superiority in concept formation, and a more diversified set of mental abilities (Peal and Lambert, 1962; Bain and Yu, 1978; and other researchers).

More particularly it has been claimed by Tunmer and Myhill (1984, p. 176) that

> metalinguistic awareness is the primary variable mediating the positive effects of bilingualism on academic achievement. The argument, in summary form, is that fully fluent bilingualism results in increased metacognitive/metalinguistic abilities which, in turn, facilitate reading acquisition which, in turn, leads to higher levels of academic achievement.

Metacognitive abilities imply the habitual capacity to reflect upon and manipulate thought

processes, while metalinguistic consciousness implies the ability to reflect upon and manipulate language concepts and functions. The suggestion is that the process of conceptually separating two languages into functionally independent systems results both in an increase of metacognitive ability and in the strengthening of metalinguistic awareness. Several recent studies (Ben-Zeev, 1977; Ianco-Worrall, 1972; Cummins, 1978; Feldman and Shen, 1971, quoted in Tunmer and Myhill, 1984, p. 177) seem to indicate that bilinguals do, in fact, enjoy superior metalinguistic, as well as metacognitive, functioning.

EARLY BILINGUALISM AND READING

There is sufficient evidence to show that reading acquisition depends to a very large extent on the development of both metacognitive and metalinguistic abilities. In other terms, the development of conscious control of perception and cognition, on the one hand, and of the formal aspects of language, on the other, play a central role in learning to read. More specifically, it can be stated that learning to read efficiently requires good phonological awareness (recognition and distinction of sounds or phonemes), distinct word awareness, sufficient form awareness (conscious control of grammatical forms and functions), and pragmatic awareness (ability to use and appropriately select communication rules in pertinent situations).

Furthermore, according to Tunmer and Bowey (1984, p. 167):

> the view that metalinguistic awareness is a prerequisite skill is not inconsistent with the possibility that reading *instruction* increases metalinguistic awareness, which would explain the sharp increases in metalinguistic abilities often observed among beginning readers.

On the other hand, it remains true that balanced bilingualism enhances, in turn, metacognitive and metalinguistic development in very young children (4–8 years old). The argument then could be phrased as follows: both bilingualism and reading are stimulated and fostered by the gradual acquisition of metacognitive and metalinguistic abilities; whereas bilingual reading is expected to enhance both linguistic competence and cognitive development to a very high degree and at a very early age. A great many findings support the conclusion that learning to read as early as the age of 3 results in greater intellectual flexibility, conscious cognitive control, richer linguistic competence as compared with illiterate peers (Doman, 1964; Cohen, 1977). It is therefore safe to infer that early bilingual reading ability should have a strong impact upon the child's cognitive and linguistic growth.

EARLY BILINGUAL GROWTH: AN OBJECTIVE OF BASIC EDUCATION

It is more and more widely granted today that interethnic communication and world-mindedness are basic needs of the cosmopolitan citizen of the future. A defence of this statement will seem superfluous. The progress of human civilization depends on producing a generation of peace-makers, peace-lovers, and peace-bearers. It is also unquestionable that democracy is built upon education for personal as well as international understanding and co-operation. . . . But it is essential, also, that the 'New Man' of civilized society will have to be a creative learner, endowed with an ability to decode cultural and moral messages from all the experiences of humankind. Now these axioms imply a rejection of monoculturalism and of its allied state, monolingualism, taken in its narrowest sense. They also demand that we take a new look at basic education. Education, understood as the formation of the human personality in its fundamental dimensions, will have to step beyond the mere teaching of the 'three R's'; it will have to reflect concern for the socialization of the human infant, and his ethical orientation in the world of values. It will demand a basic capacity for communication and will seek to promote a sensitivity to the diversity of cultures and languages. . . . I believe that . . . bilingual education must seek to ensure personality formation and mental health, broad-mindedness in solving human problems, flexibility in strengthening intellectual powers, and meta-linguistic awareness [Titone, 1984, pp. 7–8].

Now reading is correctly considered to be central to the instrumental system leading to general education. Therefore, bilingual reading could become the main source for all-round personality formation, intellectually, emotionally, and socially.

Among other authors, it is encouraging to find in Donaldson (1978), the suggestion that a better induction into formal activities such as reading will aid the child in grasping the formal or disembodied character of thinking which schooling demands. In Donaldson's view, *reading* in particular will contribute to language awareness. *Bilingual* reading from an early age will contribute even more to laying the foundations for open-minded education when prejudices are still unknown to young children.

Case-studies of early bilingual readers

Theodore Andersson, in his captivating booklet *The Preschool Years* (1981) on family reading in two languages, starts off by quoting Burton White who expressed with emphasis his belief 'that the educational developments that take place in the year or so that begins when a child is about eight months old are *the most important and most in need of attention of any that occur in human life*'. More to the point, Benjamin Bloom (quoted in Andersson, 1981) reports, after extensive research, that

> Put in terms of intelligence measured at age 17, from conception to age 4 the individual develops 50% of his mature intelligence. . . . This would suggest the very rapid growth of intelligence in the early years and the possible great influence of the early environment on this development.

All this amounts to underscoring the unique importance of early reading carried on while the child's brain shows a high degree of plasticity and a low level of differentiation.

THE CASE FOR EARLY READING

The movement in favour of early reading is becoming impressive and covering many different countries. The starting point was signalled by the marvellous experience initiated by Glenn Doman's *How to Teach your Baby to Read* (1964), which recounted convincing principles and fascinating cases. According to Doman (1964, p. 9): (a) tiny children *want* to learn to read; (b) tiny children *can* learn to read; (c) tiny children *are* learning to read; and (d) tiny children *should* learn to read.

Numerous facts prove the validity of Doman's assumptions. He acquired valuable experience with early readers, which he set forth persuasively in his popular book, addressed to mothers. In it he declares: 'Children can read words when they are one year old, sentences when they are two, and whole books when they are three—and they love it.'

Following Doman, many educators since the early 1960s have tried out his method or similar ones and have reached wonderful results. Andersson (1981) quotes 23 instances of which at least five are not mere case-studies but experimental investigations. Beside Doman's name, the names of Söderbergh, Torrey, Goodman, Fries, Durkin, Terman, Cohan, Fowler, Hughes, Lado, Callaway, Steinberg, Emery, Witte, Ledson, Smethurst, Perlish, Taft Watson, etc., have become widely known in the history of the movement.

Besides these cases related to home influence, some investigations can be quoted, like the one conducted by the Denver Public Schools (1961/62) and another reported on by Harvey Neil Perlish (quoted in Smethurst, 1975) on the effectiveness of television reading programmes, or the CRAFT Project (Harris et al., quoted in Andersson, 1981) on a comparison of academic achievement of early readers and non-early readers, or especially Durkin's first study (1966) on the achievement of early readers from first grade to the end of grade six. Her main conclusion was that 'over the years, the early readers in this research continued to show

higher achievement in reading than the non-early-readers with whom they were matched' (Durkin, 1966, p. 110).

Andersson's accounts of early reading are far from exhaustive. In Europe the movement has found followers. A rather detailed account by Schmalohr (1973) reviews several home case-studies (Kratzmeier, 1967; Walter, 1967) and also institutional investigations carried out in kindergartens. Of particular interest is the experiment organized by Lückert (1967; 1968) with the co-operation of 240 families on 2-year old children. Specific studies by Schmalohr (1969), Schüttler-Janikulla (1969), Brem-Graeser (1969), Rüdiger and Knauer (1971) and Wilke and Denig (1972) aimed at examining young children in school settings so as to ascertain the effects of early reading on intelligence, language development, socio-emotional growth, long-range reading ability. Results were by and large positive. (See reviews in Schmalohr, 1973.)

But one of the best experiments was carried out by Rachel Cohen (1977) in France. Some 161 children were tested and their age ranged between 3 years 8 months and 4 years 11 months. The use of a multiple test battery evidenced that young children of pre-school age can learn to read, and secondly that reading can help them to develop their ability to grasp and formulate basic concepts.

Finally, since 1976 five experimental doctoral dissertations in applied psycholinguistics (partly published) have dealt with early reading projects carried out in different kindergartens throughout Italy. Two conclusions have been defined as a result of such investigations: (a) children can learn to read from the age of three; (b) their intellectual improvement can be seen as a result of proper reading instruction (in comparison with control groups of non-readers); (c) reading can be taught in kindergarten settings by well-trained teachers (Annessi, 1979).

THE CASE FOR EARLY BILINGUAL LITERACY

What kind of relationship can there be between pre-school reading and the bilingual child? Andersson (1981, p. 31) rightly comments:

> If a monolingual child can get a headstart by learning to read before going to school, why can't a bilingual child get a double headstart by learning to read two languages before entering school? No one would deny the educational importance of skill in reading; nor would many deny the advantage of a knowledge of two spoken languages. The theoretical advantage of knowing how to read and write in two languages would seem to be self-evident, and yet biliteracy is rarely emphasized as an objective in our schools.

In order to examine more closely the psychological aspects and the educational outcomes of early bilingual reading, Andersson (1981, pp. 32–45) presents three cases of pre-school biliteracy.

Mariana and Elena Past have learnt to read in both English and Spanish, the former beginning at age 1 year 5 months, the latter at about the same age. Word games with word cards were used following approximately what Doman suggests in his method. During her third and fourth month of reading Mariana was already skilled in reading sentences, and she was frequently reading independently. At age 3 years 8 months she was reading English at the level of the average first-grader in the second half of first grade. The same was revealed with regard to Spanish. At age 4 years 11 months, her entering a bilingual kindergarten did the rest.

Raquel and Aurelio Christian also learnt to read English and Spanish very early. At 18 months Raquel had already asked her parents the names of the letters as they had bought her an alphabet book in Spanish. Aurelio took no interest in the alphabet until much later, but absorbed words by mere association. Neither child had much interest in reading books of any length until about 5. Reading Spanish at home led on to reading English when they entered school. Later progress in grade school was excellent for both children.

Yuha and Chinha Ok Ro Lee are Korean/

English bilinguals and biliterates. Since Yuha's development in Korean was far in advance of her development in English, her father decided, in order to prepare her for kindergarten, to initiate her into reading in English, her weaker language. Yuha liked to watch television, especially *Sesame Street*, and learned all of the letters of the English alphabet. Then her parents taught her reading systematically. She learnt how to read first in English, while the language of instruction and explanation was Korean. But later on, in one month, thanks to a special programme, Yula learnt to read and write Korean just before she became a first-grader. Lee observes that at the end of a month's instruction Yuha's skills in reading and writing the Korean language were better than her corresponding English skills. Biliteracy is more than just knowledge of two languages; it implies behaving properly in two cultures. In fact, Lee (1977, pp. 143–4) writes about his daughter:

> She speaks and behaves like an American among Americans; she speaks and behaves like a Korean among Koreans. Early bilingual reading seems to have aided her for her bilingual and bicultural adjustment in the United States.

Andersson (1981, pp. 44–5) submits the following correct conclusions:

> The experience of the children in the three bilingual families . . . suggests that, far from being a double burden, learning to read in two languages is a double joy, leading to a positive self-image.
>
> The term 'early' in the expressions 'early reading' or 'early reader' is seen to vary all the way from age six months, as with Kimio Steinberg, to nearly five years, as in the case of Yuha Lee, suggesting that this concept is, or at least can be, quite flexible.
>
> One notes significant uniformities among the parent-teachers involved in the cases I have cited. They exert no pressure on the child; rather they try to sense what will interest the child. The parent-teacher's task seems to consist in reading the child's wishes and in inventing games to stimulate this interest. Successful parents seem to include their young child in their conversations and activities. Above all, early reading appears, as in the case of Yuha Lee, to be related to establishing a sense of personal and social values. Parents who read, study, and discuss interesting or important subjects in the presence of their children and who answer their children's questions create a close relationship with their children, a relationship which older children are quick to adopt with their younger siblings.

Now the question is: can bilingual reading be taught in pre-elementary schools by teachers? And why not use early bilingual reading instruction as a means to aid disadvantaged groups like immigrant children? The answer to such questions can be given only by institutional experiments to be carried out with larger samples of young subjects. It is this perspective that will now be illustrated.

An Italian research project on early bilingual literacy

I shall try to summarize the main lines of a research project I designed aimed at developing the experimental conditions for teaching early bilingual reading in institutional settings. The essential aspects of this project have already been outlined in a previous essay (Titone, 1983).

THE EARLY BILINGUAL READING EXPERIMENTAL PROJECT

Progressing from mere experience to scientific experimentation means defining more accurately objectives, materials, instruments, and evaluation measures.

It is advisable: (a) to clarify the basic issues connected with early bilingual reading (during the pre-school years), its psycho-educational aspects, its advantages and possible draw-backs; (b) to prepare a transition from mere occasional experience in the home to true scientific experimentation in kindergarten and/or nursery school; and (c) to design and build appropriate teaching materials linked with child motivation and language abilities.

The present author has built special materials (a reading kit and guide-book for parents

and teachers) for playfully teaching to read in two languages simultaneously (Italian/English, Italian/French and Italian/German; Italian/Spanish is being prepared and Castilian/Basque is being tried out). A discussion of the experimental paradigm follows.

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

This research intends to check: (a) the possibility and effectiveness of simultaneous learning to read in two languages from the age of 4 years (in any case before 6); (b) the correlation between early literacy and bilingual development; (c) the correlation between early biliteracy and cognitive development; and (d) the correlation between early bilingual literacy and the overcoming of cognitive and linguistic disadvantages of lower-income-group or immigrant children.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The experimental control of the above variables will consist of the following procedures: (a) pretesting verbal intelligence and ascertaining the non-existence of reading ability at the start; (b) the systematic use of appropriate reading materials, namely the 'Early Bilingual Reading Kit' (Titone, 1977): the materials should be applied for at least one school year; and (c) posttesting bilingual reading competence on the basis of the above material.

Special scoring scales are being produced in order to compare individual results. Subjects will be assessed with respect to age, sex, socioeconomic level, learning motivation, IQ, rate of oral language development. Raw scores are to be processed by Titone's research team. Teaching can be carried on also by parents if competent; but as a rule kindergarten teachers will do the teaching under supervision.

Standard materials can serve for more than one child (two or three maximum).

EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS

The following data and measures will be collected:

Intelligence pre-test: the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for children of pre-school age or another equivalent verbal intelligence test can be used. To be administered before starting the experiment.

Bilingualism pre-test: for checking linguistic competence on the basis of visual or motor stimuli (picture test). Verbal responses in terms of short narratives will be evaluated as to: (a) phonological correctness; (b) grammatical correctness and completeness; (c) lexical richness (quantity and appropriate use of words); and (d) verbal fluency. Practically, one should check for: (a) number of pronunciation errors on the total of words; (b) number of errors on the total of sentences; (c) number of words and number of errors of meaning on the total of words; and (d) rhythm (fast, middle, slow) of utterances.

Pre-reading test: reading of one's own first and last names printed on the blackboard or on cardboard (in capital letters).

Reading post-test: based on the reading material of the last booklet presented in the kit: check speed, correctness, comprehension (total number of errors).

Bilingualism post-test: the same initial picture test: check number of words, sentences, descriptive details with comparison with initial results (pre-test).

Intelligence post-test: by means of the same initial test in an alternate form.

Questionnaire: to be submitted to both parents and teachers.

QUESTIONNAIRE ON THE EXPERIENCE

The following questionnaire can be administered orally or in writing:

1. At what age did your child begin to speak?
2. When did he/she begin to find amusement in scribbling?

3. When did he/she show interest in writing or in written things, like: neon signs, television advertising, posters, comics, words connected with pictures?
   (Please indicate age in general, if remembered, for each type of object.)
4. At what age the first reading took place: in one language/in the other language?
5. What did he/she learn to read: in one language/in the other language?
6. Did he/she show fast/slow progress?
7. How often does he/she show the desire to read? During the day (number of times)?/During the week (number of times)?
8. How long does his/her application to reading last? Less than 10 minutes/more than 30 minutes?
9. Has he/she been undergoing an ebb-and-flow process in his/her reading interests? In what period of age (and for how long) did he/she keep his/her reading interest alive? In what period of age (and for how long) did he/she neglect or reject reading?
10. What is his/her *present* degree of interest in reading (high-middle-low)?
11. Are you in favour (or against) reading at preschool age? Why?

TEACHING METHODS

The general hints given here refer to the Bilingual Reading Method as presented in the reading kit. However, keeping these indications in mind, other types of materials can be designed, especially if the two languages do not include Italian. The present hints concern the general teaching approach, some basic suggestions and the use of the material.

One preliminary question: Is reading in two languages really easy? In order to answer this question we must first point out the activities which facilitate the child's learning to read in a single language:

Search and naming games for objects, animals, loved ones; games dealing with the inexhaustible curiosity about an environment where surprise is continuous, where the unknown is a potential for personal conquest.

Global attainment of some realities and later tentative analyses: in the kitchen, tools; in the garden, plants, in the train, wheels; in dolls, legs, arms, head, etc.

The considerations are no different in the handling of bilingual reading: some basic activities come into play in enjoyable games which solicit curiosity towards: (a) the oral and written knowledge of words or sounds having to do with objects, animals, people of particular interest; (b) the global perception of easy sentences dealing with the child's experience (i.e. well-defined familiar objects of certain interest: one's own body, a toy, family members, etc.).

Objects that are not familiar or words that are not yet part of the child's vocabulary should be avoided, as should single letters totally isolated from the context of a phrase or sentence. The spoken and familiar must always precede the written form.

Our method implies some preliminary suggestions such as the following: first, begin with a game or pleasant conversation; second, focus upon a word or a sentence in one of the two languages, writing it on a card or indicating it on the appropriate chart or in a booklet; read it aloud and have the child repeat it.

In the first phase one should not worry about having the child distinguish between the single letters. He will discover these spontaneously and one can, in any case, point them out later in the written or spoken word.

The main method of teaching a child a language is through play. Everything should appear like a game of discovery and invention in which words, and later letters, serve to construct sentences, as if it were a question of placing one block upon the other, brick upon brick. Many spontaneous games can come about through the child's initiative, others may be invented by the educator.

Games may be numerous and varied. Some may be of the following types: matching the cards with words and then later with sentences; rapid reading contests; finding the right card as in a game of cards; action cards, like in Montessori's 'command game'; sentences to construct—in this case cards with words or

sentence pieces should be used. The child is asked to read, understand and link up the single cards in an order in such a way as to make up a sentence. When he is finished, he reads the whole constructed sentence aloud.

As educators (parents and teachers) have found out, the child does not find it strange that objects and actions are not only described in two different languages, but are also written and read in two different languages. If, in fact, he lives in a bilingual environment he will be used to not only hearing sounds, words and sentences in two languages, but also to seeing books, magazines, comics and printed matter of all sorts in two languages as well.

Fundamentally the instructional method is based on the assumption that optimal learning takes place when there is harmony between visual sensations (V), auditory sensations (A) and tactile sensations (T). The VAT language learning system emphasizes the fundamental aspects and factors of an easy means of learning bilingual reading based on the use of: the visual (recognition of the forms of words), the auditory (association of sound and written word) and the tactile (touching the cards on which the words are written) as a pattern of meaning integrated by the direct and pleasurable experience of the child interacting with the adult.

One step at a time, one word at a time, one sentence at a time, one page at a time! The material is never shown all at once to the child, nor the successive parts shown before the preceding step has been mastered.

Who are the targets of this early reading method? At present the use of the Early Bilingual Reading Kit is being used with children from the age of 4 living in bilingual families; in bilingual or multilingual areas (in Italy, especially the French-Italian speaking area of Valle d'Aosta, the German-Italian area of Alto Adige/Bozen; in the Basque Country); and in immigrant children's homes or schools.

However, a few attempts are being made in bilingual or international kindergartens (Turin, Milan and Rome). Results are not yet available owing to the short time that has elapsed since the beginning of the experiment, though the impressions gathered from parents and educators are so far favourable.

It is noteworthy that this method and the material have been adapted to an experimental project which is being carried on in the Basque Country with Basque-Castillian bilingual children (ages 4 to 6). The co-ordinator has translated and adapted the kit into Castillian and Euskara (Basque) and is using it to teach a large number of children reading in both languages at the same time. The first results of this project are expected by the end of 1985.

No doubt many problems are still open to discussion and research. I believe that there is sufficient warrant for positive confirmation of the main hypotheses outlined at the beginning of this article. In particular, it is believed that great advantages will be achieved on behalf of the maintenance of bilingual competence in immigrant children in many countries. This expectation seems to be fulfilled by an attempt to apply the method to Italian immigrant children in some German-speaking areas of Switzerland. Promises are substantial. The opportunity must not be missed. ■

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